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A tribute to Gheorge Racoviță (1940–2015)

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Gheorghe Racoviță, grandson of the great Romanian naturalist, Emil Racoviță, the founder of biospeleology (1907) and of the world's first Institute of Speleology (Cluj, 1920), decided to continue the work and research of his grandfather by joining the Institute in 1963. He was a true mentor for several generations of Institute's cave researchers.

As a biologist, Gheorghe Racoviță worked and published in various scientific fields: subterranean ecology, climatology and glaciology, karst geomorphology and protection. He dedicated much of his time to taxonomy, ecology, origin and evolution of cave fauna, mathematical modeling of climatic processes and the ice of Scărișoara Glacier, or to the concept of environmental protection of caves and karst. His publishing record comprises 196 titles in 12 volumes, 20 chapters in collective books, 136 scientific papers, 8 research reports and 20 science articles for the larger public. In his last working years, before retiring, he was deeply captivated by the history of science, focusing on the life and work of his grandfather, Emil Racoviță. In his great generosity, he donated the entire familial records (original documents, letters, photographs etc) to the Romanian Academy Library in Cluj-Napoca.

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Gheorghe Racoviță always polarized the scientific discussions; he was an acknowledged personality, very sober and of great dignity. He was of an extreme modesty (a feature of his illustrious family), so he has been constantly "overshadowed" by those with fewer scientific and human qualities, but eager to affirm themselves. Even between 1970 and 1990, a period when research funds were almost non-existent, he managed to initiate and conduct high-level research. He considerably contributed to the development of cave science in Romania, by always approaching new fields. He very often accompanied us, his younger colleagues, in cave field trips, where we shared shelter, thoughts and provisions with the same magnanimousness with which we discussed in his office on Clinicilor street number 5.

With a fragile health, he retired from the institute in 2009 and passed away on 1st of December 2015.

Gheorghe Racoviță lived for speleology, as we, his followers, do. He constantly fought for a decision-making position of the Institute of Speleology in issues of protection and conservation of caves in Romania, as Emil Racoviță always advocated, and as required by the law for the establishment of the Institute of Speleology (April 26, 1920). With the disappearance of Gheorghe Racoviță, the Institute of Speleology, with its departments in Cluj and Bucharest, lost a remarkable researcher, a true model of professional ethics, a mentor and an authentic leader.

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